

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-16

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 EB-11 COME-00 SWF-02 IO-14 AGR-20

FDRE-00 AID-20 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-07 H-03 INR-11 L-03

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R 161335Z SEP 74

FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3922

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FOLLOWING TEL SENT ACTION NEW DELHI INFO BOMBAY AND MADRAS
FROM CALCUTTA SEPT 12, 1974, REPEATED TO YOU, QUOTE

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE CALCUTTA 1903

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: EAGR, ECON, IN

SUBJ: WEST BENGAL SOUTH OF THE GANGES--A SKETCH OF THE FOOD
SITUATION

SUMMARY. FAMINE CONDITIONS EXIST TODAY IN LARGE PARTS OF PURULIA DISTRICT AND THREATEN THROUGHOUT THE DISTRICT WHICH IS SEVERELY HIT BY DROUGHT. ONLY SLIGHTLY BETTER CONDITIONS PREVAIL IN PARTS OF BANKURA AND IN TRIBAL POCKETS OF MIDNAPORE IT MAY BE EQUALLY BAD. MANY LANDLESS RURAL PEOPLE IN NADIA AND MURSHIDABAD ARE LIVING ON ONE MEAL A DAY, AND THEIR LOT WILL WORSEN FURTHER UNTIL THE NOVEMBER HARVEST. CONDITIONS GENERALLY IN THOSE DISTRICTS, HOWEVER, AND IN MIDNAPORE AS WELL, ARE REASONABLY GOOD. BIRBHUM AND BURDWAN ARE RELATIVELY WELL OFF AND CROP PROSPECTS ARE EXCELLENT. THE STATE HAS NO STOCKS OF GRAIN FOR USE IN NON-URBAN AREAS AND WILL NEED MASSIVE INPUTS FROM THE CENTER TO STAVE OFF DISASTER DURING THE NEXT TWO MONTHS.

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NADIA AND EASTERN MURSHIDABAD

2. AS YOU MOVE NORTH FROM CALCUTTA, THE TRANSITION TO A TOTALLY RURAL SETTING IS COMPLETED JUST NORTH OF DUM DUM AIRPORT. THIS LEFT BANK OF THE SOUTHWARD-FLOWING HOOGHLY RIVER, BORDERING ON BANGLADESH, IS JUTE COUNTRY INTERMIXED PRUDENTLY WITH PADDY FIELDS. PARTITION BROUGHT THE JUTE, FORMERLY GROWN SOLELY EAST OF THE NEW BORDER, AND THE LARGE INCREMENTAL POPULATION WHO KNOW HOW TO RAISE IT. THE COMBINATION OF HEAVIER POPULATION AND REDUCED CEREAL ACREAGE HAS MADE NADIA DISTRICT 50 PERCENT DEFICIT IN FOOD REQUIREMENTS, AND HELPED MAKE MURSHIDABAD 20 PERCENT DEFICIT. ANY NATURAL DISASTER--AND FLOODS ARE COMMON--NATURALLY WORSENS THIS PICTURE.

3. SO NADIA NEEDS 200,000 METRIC TONS OF CEREALS ANNUALLY FROM OUTSIDE ITS BORDERS, MURSHIDABAD (POPULATION 3.1 MILLION) NEEDS 120,000. NADIA LOOKS TO THE GOVERNMENT FOR 100,000 METRIC TONS, MURSHIDABAD 40,000 METRIC TONS. THESE AMOUNTS (IF THEY ARE FORTHCOMING) WILL BE SOLD AT SUBSIDIZED PRICES ("MODIFIED RATIONING"), LESS THAN HALF THE MARKET PRICE, TO THE URBAN POPULATION AND LANDLESS AGRICULTURAL LABORERS (500 GRAMS OF WHEAT PER WEEK); USED IN PARTIAL PAYMENT FOR LABOR OR PUBLIC WORKS ("TEST RELIEF"); AND GRANTED OUTRIGHT TO THE ONE PERCENT OF THE POPULATION REGARDED AS PERMANENTLY OR TEMPORARILY UNEMPLOYABLE.

4. THE REMAINDER OF THE DEFICIT IS THEORETICALLY TO BE MADE UP BY THE WORKINGS OF THE OPEN MARKET. BUT WITH WHEAT AND RICE PRICES AT AN UNPRECEDENTED HIGH, ONLY THE AFFLUENT CAN BUY THEM. THE NEXT TWO MONTHS--UNTIL HARVEST--WILL BE BAD MONTHS FOR THE LANDLESS LABORER. HE HAS SOME WORK NOW, IN THE "AUS" RICE HARVEST (WHICH ALSO HELPS INASMUCH AS IT BRINGS COARSE GRADE RICE TO THE MARKET, WHICH SELLS A THIRD OR MORE BELOW THE MARKET FOR REGULAR RICE) AND THE JUTE HARVEST. BUT THROUGHOUT SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER HE WILL HAVE LITTLE OR NO INCOME AND EVEN THE "MODIFIED RATION" PRICE WILL GO OUT OF HIS REACH. MANY OF THESE PEOPLE ARE LIVING ON ONE MEAL A DAY NOW, AND THINGS WILL GET WORSE. THERE IS PROBABLY NO STARVATION IN THESE DISTRICTS.

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WESTERN MURSHIDBAD, BIRBHUM, BURDWAN

5. CROSS THE HOOGHLY AT BERHAMPORE, AND YOU PLUNGE INTO THE RICE BOWL OF WEST BENGAL. THE CROP IN THE FIELDS LOOKS RICH, BEAUTIFUL, FULL OF PROMISE. MANY SUSPECT THE GRANARIES OF THE KULAKS IN THIS AREA CONTAIN THE RICE NEEDED TO TIDE THE STATE OVER THE TWO GRIM MONTHS AHEAD. BUT THEY AREN'T SURE, AND THE PRICE OF FINDING OUT THROUGH A POLICY OF COERCIVE

PROCUREMENT COULD BE HIGH--IN 1967, FOR EXAMPLY, IT SPLIT THE CONGRESS AND HELPED USHER IN THE PERIOD OF UNITED FRONT RULE. THE GOVERNMENT'S STRATEGY FOR AVERTING CHAOS SEEMS TO BE TO KEEP THE URBAN PEOPLE AND MIDDLE AND UPPER LEVELS IN THE COUNTRY REASONABLY WELL CONTENTED. IT IS PROBABLY THAT THIS STRATEGY WILL CONTINUE.

6. EVEN LANDLESS LABOR IS RELATIVELY WELL OFF HERE BECAUSE OF MULTIPLE CROPPING AND AN UNUSUAL ARRAY OF ALTERNATIVE EMPLOYMENT.

BANKURA, PURULIA

7. WHEN YOU PASS DURGAPUR, THE LARGE, MOSTLY PUBLIC-SECTOR INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX, YOU ENTER A NEW, HARD WORLD. HERE BEGINS THE SLOPE WHICH BECOME THE CHHOTA NAGPUR PLATEAU. RAINFALL IS ONLY marginally ADEQUATE FOR RICE CULTIVATION, AT BEST. THERE ARE EVEN LARGER AREAS OF SHORT GRESS LAND AS YOU MOVE WEST, AND WHERE THE ATTEMPT IS MADE TO EXTORT A RICE CROP OUR OF THE LOWER-LYING AREAS, IT'S A CHANCY BUSINESS. THE PEOPLE HERE WORK MUCH HARDER THAN THEIR NEIGHBORS TO THE EAST IN ORDER TO PRODUCE MUCH LESS. THEIR NUMBERS HAVE LONG SINCE OUTRUN THE LAND RESOURCES. THEY VERY YOUNG RUN TO ENLARGED ABDOMENS, THEIR ELDERS TO HARD, GAUNT BODIES AND HARD, WIZENED FACES. THEIR YOUTH IS BRIEF.

8. YOU KNOW WHAT BANKURA IS LIKE FROM CALCUTTA 1824. PURULIA IS MUCH WORSE. THE RURAL PEOPLE OF PURULIA, ESPECIALLY THE LANDLESS, MUST BE AMONT THE MOST UNFORTUNATE IN THE WORLD TODAY.

9. IN CONTRAST TONADIA AND MURSHIDABAD, WHERE YOUNG, BRIGHT, WELL TRAINED DISTRICT MAGISTRATES SPEAK PERSUASIVELY OF LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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DEVELOPMENT PLANS TO BRING THEIR AREAS OUT OF DEFICIT STATUS, NO ONE CAN REALLY FORESEE THAT IN PURULIA. TO THIS LONG-TERM CRISIS, WHICH GROWS EACH YEAR WITH A STILL-RISING POPULATION, IS ADDED THIS YEAR A DISASTROUS DROUGHT. AS A RESULT, A SHOCKING PROPORTION OF THE PADDY FIELDS (MAYBE 40 PERCENT) HAVE NOT BEEN PLANTED, AND MANY SEED-BEDS ARE DRYING UP WITHOUT EVER BEING TRANSPLANTED. RAIN THIS PAST WEEK GAVE AN OPPORTUNITY FOR SOME ADDITIONAL TRANSPLANTING, BUT IT IS SO LATE THAT IT WILL BE marginally PRODUCTIVE AT BEST. MUCH MORE RAIN WILL BE NEEDED TO BRING IN THAT PART OF THE CROP WHICH WAS TRANSPLANTED IN TIME. SO EVEN AT THE END OF THE TRADITIONAL TWO "LEAN MONTHS" THAT LIE AHEAD, THINGS MAY NOT GET MUCH BETTER.

10. AND THINGS ARE DESPERATELY BAD NOW. FAMINE CONDITIONS EXIST

IN MANY PARTS OF THE DISTRICT. WALKING THROUGH SEVERAL VILLAGES IN VARIOUS DROUGHT-AFFECTED AREAS, WE SAW ALL THE OMINOUS SIGNS. MANY OF THE PEOPLE SEEM MARKED FOR DEATH, SOME DIRECTLY FROM STARVATION, MANY OTHERS FROM CAUSES ARISING OUT OF EXTREME MALNUTRITION. MANY CHILDREN SEEM IRREPARABLY DAMAGED, EVEN IF THEY MANAGE TO SURVIVE. IT WAS GENERALLY REPORTED THAT CONDITIONS AMONG THE TRIBALS IN UPLAND AREAS IN THE SOUTHERN PART OF THE DISTRICT ARE WORSE THAN THAT OF ANY OF THE LOWLAND DWELLERS.

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11. THE PEOPLE GENERALLY SEEM PASSIVE, RESIGNED, BUT THIS IS NOT ALWAYS THE CASE. THE FIRST RELIEF KITCHENS ("GRUEL KITCHENS") HAVE BEEN OPENED, AND WHILE THEY FEED A FEW, THEY CREATE EXPECTATIONS, DEMANDS, AMONG ALL. THE STATE MINISTER OF FORESTS, A PURULIA MLA, TOOK US TO VISIT ONE SUCH KITCHEN, FEEDING 500 PEOPLE, SELECTED BY THE ADMINISTRATION AS THE MOST NEEDY OF THAT AREA. ENROUTE WE VISITED THE VILLAGE--RAJNAGAR-- WHERE HE HAD TAUGHT SCHOOL FOR MANY YEARS BEFORE FIRST BEING Elected IN 1967. HE IS OBVIOUSLY A LOCAL HERO IN THIS RELATIVELY WELL-OFF VILLAGE. EVEN SO THE LOVE-FEAST AT THE SCHOOL GROUND WAS MARRED BY SOME LOUD COMPLAINTS ABOUT LACK OF FOOD. WHEN WE STARTED TO DRIVE OUT OF THE VILLAGE OUR WAY WAS TEMPORARILY BLOCKED BY SEVERAL DETERMINED LOOKING LADIES HOLDING SMALL BABIES. THEY SOON MOVED ASIDE, BUT, KNOWING THE MINISTER TO RETURN THAT WAY AT SOME POINT, OTHER

ACTIVITISTS MADE READY. AFTER VISITING THE RELIEF KITCHEN, THE MINISTER WENT ON TO HIS HOME VILLAGE, AND WE RETURNED TO PURULIA VIA RAJNAGAR--TO BE PROMPTLY "GHERAOED" THERE. THE DEMAND OF THE GHERAOERS, WHO THOUGHT THEY WERE GHERAOING THE MINISTER, WAS THAT THEIR VILLAGE BE DECLARED A "DROUGHT-AFFECTED AREA." WHEN THE OFFICIAL ACCOMPANYING US EXPLAINED (A) THAT THE MINISTER HAD GONE ELSEWHERE AND (B) THAT THE VILLAGE WAS SCHEDULED FOR SOME RELIEF, WE WERE ALLOWED TO LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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MOVE ON. THE ADMINISTRATORS EXPECT MORE, AND MORE SERIOUS, TROUBLE AT LEAST UNTIL THE RELIEF SCHEME IS FULLY OPERATIVE--TROUBLE WHICH UNFORTUNATELY IS LIKELY TO LEAD TO ALLOCATION OF SOME RELIEF FROM MORE NEEDY TO LESS NEEDY AREAS.

12. THE BEST HOPE OF THE DISTRICT IS THAT CRS AND CARE ARE MOVING IN WITH EMERGENCY GRAIN RELIEF--THE DISTRICT MAGISTRATE IS EXPECTING 5,000 METRIC TONS OF WHEAT FROM CRS ALONE. THE STATE IS ALSO GEARING UP A RELIEF PROGRAM.

13. "MODIFIED RATIONING" HELPS THAT 15 PERCENT OF THE 1.3 MILLION POPULATION WHO LIVE IN TOWNS. BUT VAST NUMBERS OF RURAL PEOPLE CANNOT PAY EVEN THE SUBSIDIZED PRICE IT PROVIDES. TEST RELIEF IS NOT ON A SIGNIFICANT SCALE AS YET. TWO PERCENT OF THE POPULATION RECEIVES GRATUITOUS RELIEF. "CHEAP CANTEEN" FACILITIES WILL FEED ABOUT 150,000 PER DAY, INCLUDING NEEDY TOWNSMEN, AT MINIMAL PRICES. FORTY "GRUEL KIZCHENS" SUCH AS THE ONE WE VISITED, EACH FEEDING 500, WILL BE OPENED. ACCORDING TO THE MINISTER, ALL THIS HAS BEEN APPROVED AND GRAIN SHOULD BEGIN ARRIVING SOON TO MAKE IT A REALITY. WE HOPE SO.

MIDNAPORE

14. TRAVELLING EAST FROM PURULIA, YOU NOTICE NOT A SHARP BREAK, AS AT DURGAPUR, BUT A GRADUAL IMPROVEMENT IN CONDITIONS--TOO GRADUAL FOR THE SAKE OF BANKURA. IN MIDNAPORE (POPULATION 5.6 MILLION), YOU ARE BACK IN AT LEAST THE SOUTHERN EDGE OF THE RICE BOWL. MIDNAPORE PRODUCES ONLY ONE CROP A YEAR, BUT IT IS A GOOD ENOUGH CROP TO MAKE IT A SURPLUS DISTRICT--IF THERE IS NO NATURAL DISASTER. THE AUGUST 15 CYCLONE WAS NOT QUITE OF DISASTER PROPORTIONS EXCEPT FOR THOSE IMMEDIATELY AFFECTED. IN FACT THE ATTENDANT RAINS PROVIDED WELCOME RELIEF FROM A LONG DROUGHT AND ON BALANCE IMPROVED RATHER THAN DAMAGED CROP PROSPECT.

15. THE ONE-CROP PATTERN HAS ONE VERY SERIOUS AFFECT--LAND-LESS LABOR IS UNEMPLOYED MOST OF THE YEAR. THUS EVEN HERE THERE IS ACUTE DISTRESS AMONG LARGE NUMBERS OF PEOPLE, INCLUDING THE 400,000-PLUS TRIBALS, WHO ARE TOO POOR TO BUY EVEN AT THE

"MODIFIED RATION" PRICE. THE TRIBALS ARE PROBABLY ALMOST AS
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BAD OFF AS THEIR COUNTERPARTS IN PURULIA.

16. AGAIN IT IS NOT THE POOREST WHO DO THE PROTESTING. OUR
APPOINTMENT WITH THE ASSISTANT DISTRICT MAGISTRATE WAS DELAYED
FOR SOME TIME AS HE WAS GHERAOED IN HIS OFFICE, WHICH WAS
ULTIMATELY RANSACKED BY A MOB HEADED BY YOUNG CONGRESS LEADERS
COMPLAINING OF HIGH PRICES AND SHORTAGES.

CONCLUSION

17. MOST OF THE DISTRICTS OF WEST BENGAL SOUTH OF THE GANGES
NEED CEREAL GRAINS FROM OUTSIDE THEIR BORDERS TO AVERT LOCALIZED,
AND IN SOME CASE WIDESPREAD, FAMINE. THE STATE GOVERNMENT DOES NOT
HAVE ANY GRAIN STOCKS, AND LITTLE HOPE OF OBTAINING ANY LOCALLY
BEFORE DECEMBER. MASSIVE INPUTS FROM THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT
ARE ESSENTIAL DURING THE NEXT TWO MONTHS.
PICKERING UNQUOTE
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